

Kudzu (*Pueraria lobata*)

A Growing Problem in Indiana

History

Kudzu was introduced into the United States in 1876 at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition. During the 1930's, kudzu was promoted by the Soil Conservation Service and planted throughout the southern U.S. where it was used for animal feed and erosion control. Since then, kudzu has invaded the forested lands of the southern US covering millions of acres. In Indiana Kudzu is found primarily south of I-70, but isolated sites have been found as far north as LaPorte county. Kudzu continues to spread further north and adapt to colder climates and is now known to reproduce from seed in the state. As of March 1, 2005, over 70 sites in 26 counties have been located in Indiana.

What does kudzu look like?

Leaves: Kudzu leaves look just like a bean leaf. A single trifoliate leaf is comprised of 3 smaller leaflets. The leaves and vines of young plants are often hairy. Trifoliate leaves can be as large as 10" inches across. Brown leaves often remain on the plant after the first hard freeze but eventually fall off vines by mid winter.



Flowers: Flowers are elongated and pinkish to purple. They usually appear in mid to late summer.



Seeds: Kudzu has a constricted seed pod and the shape of the individual seeds can be seen in the pod.



Kudzu Distribution



Kudzu can be confused with wild grape, wild cucumber and greenbrier. However, these plants have a simple leaf, not a compound leaf comprised of 3 leaflets. There are native Indiana plants in the bean family that can look similar to kudzu, but their leaves are usually not as large as kudzu and native plants usually do not have the aggressive growth habit that kudzu has. Kudzu vines often cover trees and all other vegetation creating a monotypic landscape.

Greenbrier



Photo from www.discoverlife.org

Wild Cucumber



Photo from www.allcreatures.org

Wild Grape



Photo from www.trog.cs.umb.edu

Damage: Kudzu out competes native vegetation by shading and using valuable nutrients. It also weighs down trees and increases snow load on trees causing their tops to break. In addition causing tree damage, kudzu mats can be 5 feet deep and impassible leaving many areas unusable for outdoor recreation. Kudzu mats create an ideal environment for rodents and snakes. **Finally, kudzu may act as a reservoir for soybean diseases such as soybean rust.**



Photo Courtesy of Melinda Johnson

Uses: In some areas of the country, kudzu vines are used for basket making and as a forage crop for animals. There are also recipes available for making kudzu dishes, including kudzu jelly. However, in most cases the benefits from kudzu do not out weight the negative effects it has on the environment.

Control Strategies:

Biological Control: Currently biological control of kudzu is not a practical option in the United States. There has been a great deal of researched conducted on biological control of kudzu and numerous fungi, bacteria, and insect biocontrol agents of kudzu are being investigated. The bacteria *Psuedomonas syringae* pv Phaseolicola has been shown to kill young kudzu seedlings. A fungus called *Synchytrium puerariae* has been found in Asia and California and is being investigated as a potential biocontrol agent. The fungus *Myrothecium verrucaria* shows the most promise. Researchers discovered that this fungi will cause provide 95-100% control of kudzu 14 days after applications. Although this

pathogen is native to the US, it will infect soybeans. Numerous insects native to China including sawflies, borers, weevils and scarabs are also being studied. However, all of the control agents studied are harmful to leguminous crops such as soybeans.

Goats as Biocontrol Agents: Goats prefer broad leaf plants over grasses and have been used to control multiflora rose and kudzu in pastures. However, the number of goats needed to provide control may be cost prohibitive and maintaining animals at a site is labor intensive. There are also additional problems such as erosion which can occur with over grazing and high amount of foot traffic from hooves animals. More research needs to be conducted on this topic, but it may provide an alternative for land owners that have animal resources available and are looking for alternative ways to control kudzu.



Mechanical: Mechanical control should be incorporated with chemical control strategies to achieve adequate kudzu suppression. Pruning kudzu away from adjacent trees is a good way to start controlling a kudzu patch.

- **Fire:** Fire alone will not control kudzu patches, but it may be used to increase accessibility prior to chemical applications. It can also be useful for stimulating kudzu seed germination before applying follow up herbicide applications. **Check your local ordinances before proceeding with this.**
- **Mowing:** Repeated close mowing can slow the spread of kudzu. However it can often be difficult to get mowing equipment into rough areas. It must be performed frequently or it will merely increase kudzu propagules resulting in more kudzu plants. All equipment should be cleaned of plant debris before it is moved from the site.
- **Heavy Machinery:** In some cases, landowners have used bull dozers to remove kudzu and reclaim land. Results from this practice can be variable. Roots are very deep in older patches and may not be easily removed. If all of the roots are not removed, kudzu will quickly grow back in the area. After

removal, there is usually a large amount of kudzu debris that must be disposed in a proper manner in order to prevent further spread of the plant. Movement of heavy equipment in an area results in soil compaction and can lead to a change in the plant species that will be able to grow in a particular site.

Chemical: Results can vary between sites even with the same type of herbicide application. Herbicide selectivity is different for each product. Some products are highly toxic to desirable tree species unless applied in a selective manner. Product choice should consider the proximity of water to the patch, the timing of the application, the density and age of the patch, the soil type and the type of application method that is going to be used. All of these factors can affect herbicide application results. Generally, the best time to perform foliar applications of herbicides to kudzu is during late summer. Plants are storing carbohydrates at this time and are more likely to translocate herbicides to storage organs, thus providing better control. However, dormant applications of certain herbicides have been very effective with the proper application techniques.

Examples of Chemicals Labeled for Kudzu Control

- Banvel-**Dicamba**
- Crossbow- **2,4 D and Triclopyr**
- Escort-**Metsulfuron methyl**
- Garlon 3A and Garlon 4A-**Triclopyr**: Safety near water varies with formulation. Dormant stump applications have been effective at many sites.
- Oust-**Sulfometoron methyl**
- Round-Up, Rodeo-**Glyphosate**: Safer near water.
- Spike 80 DF-**Tebuthiuron**
- Tordon-**Picloram and 2,4,D**
- Transline -**Chlopyralid**
- Veteran 720-**Dicamba and 2,4,D**

Pesticide information collected from:
Purdue University Fact Sheet updated 9/04,
Clemson University Fact Sheet updated 5/03
Alabama Extension Service Fact Sheet, Revised 1999.

*Mention of Trade Name implies no endorsement of a single product or associated company. **Always read pesticide labels before making any pesticide application.** Label information can be obtained from suppliers, or on the web at www.cdms.net and www.greenbook.net. For a complete list of registered products contact the Office of the Indiana State Chemist.*

No single control strategy will control kudzu. Landowners should utilize a combination of mechanical and chemical control strategies to combat this invasive weed.

Alternative species and Erosion control: In many cases, native vegetation will recolonize a site once the kudzu is removed. However, this may not be true for sites with poor soil conditions or where soil erosion occurs. A soil erosion plan should be implemented at these sites and an alternative, non invasive, non allelopathic plants species should be used to hold the soil until native vegetation can become established. Contact your local soil conservation district for assistance with erosion control and replacement species.

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